





The MICHELANGELO of MONSTERS

by stephen rebello

Special effects maestro Stan Winston discusses the special artistry of bringing horrible images to the big screen and the special challenge of keeping Tom Cruise from looking silly in *Interview With the Vampire*.

defy someone to look at the art we've sculpted and tell me that Michelangelo is any better," asserts special effects conjurer Stan Winston, waving his hand around the studios in which he and his team created the butt-kicking robotics, mechanical characters and special effects makeup for *Aliens*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Jurassic Park* and the upcoming *Interview With the Vampire*. Apparently unfazed by the way my gaze narrows at such a grandiose statement, the four-time Oscar/two-time Emmy winner continues, "I would put

the talent that is under this roof up against the finest painters, sculptors and artists of the Renaissance. Brilliant painting, brilliant sculpture, brilliant artwork that comes together here, then has got to go out there and *act*—that deserves *ultimate* respect from the artistic community."

Surrounded by various life-size artifacts of Winston's craft, his Pietàs, Davids and Sistine Chapels—fevered, edgy creations that suggest the hellspawn of Edgar Allan Poe, Gustave Doré and H.P. Lovecraft—I can say

that his stuff, even when it sits immobile, is jaw-dropping. Over there stands a chromium, scarred, blood-spattered Arnold-size *Terminator* endoskeleton. Close-by hulks a raging, man-gnashing *Predator*. Beyond are the face-sucking arachnid-like creatures and looming killer queen from *Aliens*. To the other side is white-faced Edward Scissorhands, equipped with stiletto digits, electroshocked black hair and punk Edwardian leather. Then there's a mummy. A werewolf. A Frankenstein monster. Photographs of Cicely Tyson's 110-year-old, peach-pit face for *The*

the famous Industrial Light and Magic? "I hear this all the time, and of course it bothers me, because of the two years of work that we put into it," Winston declares with a sigh. "There's a reason why I now own Digital Domain with Jim Cameron and Scott Ross, the second largest computer effects company next to ILM. I don't want to become extinct like the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*. I want to say that everyone at ILM did for that movie the most incredible, ground-breaking computer animation that has been done to date on the screen. To the audiences who saw

Nevertheless, Winston's visions are strange. Has he ever gotten so entangled with one of his creations—like Michael Redgrave's ventriloquist in *Dead of Night*, who thinks his wood dummy is alive—that it invaded his psyche? "Nightmares? I don't. Dark thoughts? Absolutely. I have less than pleasant things going on in there. There is an evil side that arises and is allowed to come out in my work. In my head, I see these faces. I have these emotions. I can imagine the most incredible things. And that's sort of cool, you know, because it's all fantasy."

This is not an uplifting film. This is not *Mary Poppins*, not *Jurassic Park*. This is a pretty unsettling story. The movie is not Anne Rice's novel, it's the essence of the novel. And if Anne Rice has a problem with that, I have a problem with Anne Rice."

Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Tucked away in a side suite—part makeup room and part mad-doctor lab—sit a row of astonishingly varied, expressive primate designs for *Congo*, the Michael Crichton story that Frank Marshall will soon direct. One can even catch a sneak preview of such stuff as the project-in-the-works *Tank Girl*.

What I don't see is any hint of the process by which Winston and his merry pranksters defile the winsome face of Tom Cruise in a particularly horrific vampiric disintegration we'll soon see on the big screen. Which is undoubtedly the way the prime movers behind *Interview With the Vampire* want it. But that's all right, because Winston has plenty to say about Cruise, about director Neil Jordan and about the movie. And what Winston has to say on the subject—in fact, on almost any subject—is refreshingly accessible, opinionated and ornery.

But first, let's clear the air on the subject of those fabulous *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs. Does it bother Winston that so many people are oblivious to his contribution to this mega-dino-pic and believe that most of the effects were computer-generated by

the movie and said, 'I think the whole thing is animation or all computer-generated images,' I say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, approximately 65 percent of all dinosaur footage in *Jurassic Park* is full-size, live, right there in your face.' Every dinosaur was designed—dramatically, dynamically and paleontologically correct—under this roof at Stan Winston's studio, from a baby Velociraptor popping out of an egg to a 9,000-pound T. rex. It looks so real, like you can reach and touch them, because you can touch them."

So, we're clear now on the matter of Stan Winston's hankering for respect. But the serious aesthetic respect he seeks does not come all that easily to one whose creations radiate so much flat-out weirdness. "There's a lot of shit that comes out of me in my creatures," Winston admits. "I mean, I'm a family man, been married for 25 years to one person and to whom I will be married for the rest of my life. My son, a well-balanced, good person is a Yale graduate and a phenomenal actor. My daughter, who just graduated from the University of Arizona, is a healthy, good human being."

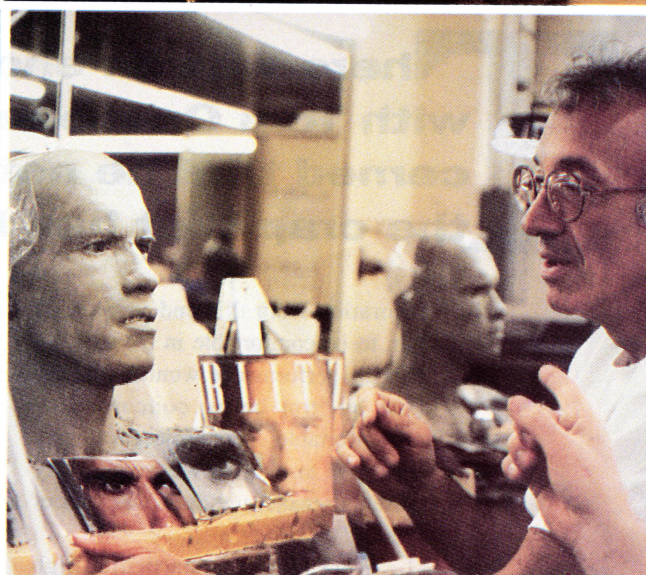
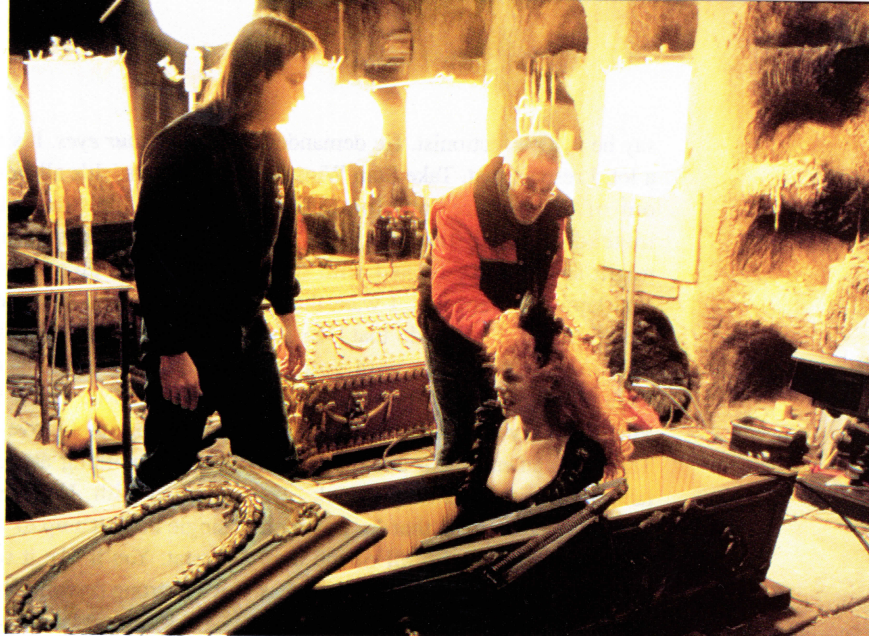
Winston turns quiet, then continues after a moment. "If you want letting-it-all-hang-out-with-Stan-Winston, let's talk about one of the easiest examples: *Pumpkinhead*, the first film that I directed." Being a horror junkie, I've seen *Pumpkinhead*. But for the legions who haven't, Winston's 1988 directorial debut was incredibly bizarre stuff about a backwoods pappy who unleashes a fiend on city slickers he blames for his young son's death. "I thought the most horrendous thoughts I could possibly think. It was the most evil-thinking fucker anybody had ever seen. I would sit back and think, 'If I really wanted to hurt somebody, what would I do?' I ended up thinking, 'I'm going to find out who you love and fuck them up right in front of you.' That's pretty sick. Every time *Pumpkinhead* hurt somebody, he kept them alive just to show them to the person they meant the most to. How do you let thoughts like that go? Make a movie and it becomes like, 'Been there, done that.'"

And what if those thoughts recur? "Make another movie," Winston says, laughing. "Give me another monster to create. If I'm going to get down and see

shit inside me like this, I'm going to put that shit on somebody else's face, like on a werewolf's or a creature's face. I don't have to go out and show how evil I am. I'm going to do it in a movie."

The faces onto which Winston has most recently been projecting his inner darkness include, of course, Tom Cruise's. Winston and his staff collaborated with writer-director Neil Jordan on creating the "look" and transformation effects for the alluring vampires in the film rendition of Anne Rice's cult classic, *Interview With the Vampire*. Resilient, resourceful, all-American Cruise is not, as we have heard over and over again, the guy one might first think of to play a dizzyingly seductive, ambisexual, Continental bloodsucker. The mention of that whole brouhaha makes Winston snap, "The hubbub, everything that preceded the making of this movie, was so trite, so shallow, so unknowledgeable about the film process. A book is not a movie, a movie is not a book. A movie is *based* on a book. When you cast a movie, you cast close to the essence of the character in the book. If someone who is cast may not be exactly the right height, but consistently has shown that he is an actor, not just a movie star, has shown it in such films as *Born on the Fourth of July* and *A Few Good Men*, has been up against Jack Nicholson and been right up there on the same level with him, then people should sit back and allow that actor to give it his best shot. Stop falling back on the idea that he's not tall enough, or on, 'I don't think he is Lestat.' There is no one Lestat, except in Anne Rice's head. Every person who reads the book has a different vision of Lestat. It was my job to assist that actor, to try and make him look like the essence of the character in the book. The essence of that character is not his height. This is not Frankenstein, not a person who was supposed to be eight feet tall. So maybe [he's] not tall in stature, but let's say tall in essence. It's up to him to act the part. If he doesn't act it, then he blew it. But it's shallow-thinking absurdity to say an actor can't act when he is known for being a good actor."

Stan and Deliver:
(clockwise from top)
Interview With the Vampire, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Jurassic Park* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.



Aside from Cruise's being able to acquit himself credibly under auspicious circumstances, he is known for being a very hands-on guy who enmeshes himself in niggly details of any production,

nosing into everything. Has Winston himself no slouch in the obsessive-compulsive department, ever had an actor mess with him? "Yeah—Tom," he answers, then cracks up. "No, no—I get him. He gets me. Some would

say he is a perfectionist. He demanded a lot. I respect that. Take Stan Winston out of the picture, put Joe Schmo instead of me in the mix, and Joe might say, 'Cruise fucked with me.' You know: 'I want this, I want that, I won't do this, I won't do that.' To Joe Schmo, that's fucking with you. To Stan Winston it's, 'You want that? Fine. Let's try and make that happen.' There was an enormous amount of collaboration with Tom on his 'look.' He was very concerned that he not look silly—especially with all of the crap that had been going on with the press and everything. There was a lot of col-

front of your eyes. It's magic. There are no 'effects.' It's all in one shot without a cut. It isn't done by a computer, though I'm not going to say that a computer didn't assist us. It's something that you have never seen before in film history. Tom also had this 'back from the swamp' make-up that we put him in and he threw himself into the part. I absolutely love that. The man is as hard-working an actor as I've ever worked with. He doesn't phone in a single beat. It's up to Tom to create his Lestat. You'll like it or you won't, but it's a strong performance."

As strong and good as some have

How well did they gel? "Neil Jordan's a person who thinks thoughts often-times so beyond the thoughts I'm thinking that I like connecting with him. When I can. It's like osmosis. I need to get into the mind of the director and, hopefully, make a connection. After all, that's who I'm working for. On this movie, we were integrated in the design, the look of the vampires. I would say about the work we did for this film, or any film, that there is a certain amount of 'Stan Winston' in everything that comes out of this studio. But there should never be a signature of 'Stan Winston' on anything.

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laboration from this end in wanting him to be comfortable in his look, so that his performance wouldn't be stifled by him being concerned or uncomfortable. This project was very important to him, so we worked very closely to make sure there was a lot of finesse."

Were there any particular high points in helping Cruise persuade the dubious that he *is* the Vampire Lestat? Winston is particularly keen on the moment when Claudia, the ravishing kiddie vampire, destroys the man who converted her into one of the undead. "He goes from Tom Cruise's Lestat to Lestat looking like an AIDS victim—the skin pulled and stretched over his skull—and it's quite a transformation," Winston observes. "You see, many of the movie creatures that I was most a fan of growing up were based on spectacular performances, like Spencer Tracy as Dr. Jekyll and Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. That aside, we've been seeing transformations in movies for years, but we're always aware of the effect and have gone, 'Oh, cool effect.' We've just finished this thing for *Interview With the Vampire* and I'm telling you for a fact that it happens right in

said? "Tom Cruise has been told by the world that he can't play Lestat. 'What a risk to his career,' that kind of thing, right? What I do is take a lot of risks, so, again, I respect that. Just tell me something like, 'You can't build a 9,000-pound Tyrannosaurus rex robot that's going to work,' and I'm building it. There are very few actors in history that have reached a level where you go, 'My God, that's brilliant.' Jack Nicholson has had moments of absolute brilliance that are just off-the-wall and right. Robert De Niro, Rod Steiger. They've taken some of the biggest risks of all time. It's the only way brilliance can happen. I am seeing such moments of brilliance from Tom Cruise in this. Now, you can't have wall-to-wall brilliance, because that's impossible. But there are moments he hits in his creation of Lestat that I think are classic. How often do we see anything where it's not just, 'Boy, that was a really excellent performance' or 'That was a really great character'? But, in this, you go, 'Whoa! I'm feeling a little uncomfortable.' I think he's really special."

Neil Jordan, like many of the directors with whom Winston tends to work, is also a formidable, galvanizing force on a set.

The signature should be that of the director, of that character and of the particular actor. In the end, this is not an uplifting film. This is not *Mary Poppins*, not *Jurassic Park*. This is a pretty unsettling story. [Jordan's] movie is not Anne Rice's novel, it's the essence of the novel. And if Anne Rice has a problem with that, I have a problem with Anne Rice."

Winston has trafficked with such high-powered directors as Tim Burton, Steven Spielberg and James Cameron and such actors as Johnny Depp, Danny DeVito and the *Jurassic Park* ensemble. "Again, there is an essence of me when you see the Penguin or Edward Scissorhands characters, but those are Tim Burton movies. And remember, we only assisted Johnny Depp in creating what he did with Edward Scissorhands. That was a great collaborative hand-off. People who are secure will not be threatened by what we do. An actor has to be comfortable with what he's wearing, because you can make some neat rubber pieces, but if the guy wearing them is not comfortable, it's lost. With Johnny, it was like we went, 'Okay, so now here's what we've done,' and then BAM!—he

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became that character. I love it when actors become entrenched in their characters like that. But first, it's my job to be Tim Burton, to get inside that mind. And it's a pretty bizarre mind, you know?"

I ask Winston if, for all his technical wizardry, he couldn't have managed to perform some magic that might have made the *humans* in *Jurassic Park* seem anywhere near as cool as the dinosaurs. "It's like the old adage, 'Never act with kids or dogs,'" Winston asserts. "The dinosaurs in the movie, by virtue of their uniqueness and reality, acted their parts pretty damn well. Unfortunately for the rest of the actors in that particular motion picture—and this is where insecurity comes in... you know, people are intimidated by fantasy characters because, naturally, that's where your attention is drawn. I thoroughly enjoyed the human performances. We all have only so much creative energy and we have to prioritize where we're going to compromise. Steven compromised in the right places, in terms of what the movie was about for audiences: dinosaurs."

What about dealing with James Cameron, about whose volcanic intensity some have complained loudly? "A lot of people have problems with that because Jim's a pretty awesome presence. His attention to his vision and detail is challenging. People find that hard to deal with? Good. Fine. It's terrific to deal with if you really take it as a positive challenge, knowing that your work is going to look wonderful. Take *Aliens*, when Sigourney Weaver looks at the queen alien and says, 'Get away from her, you bitch!' Well, I had to see that bitch. If you're supposed to be afraid of a character, then I've got to create an illusion that's going to scare the piss out of you. And that's not just the way the thing looks, it's the way it acts. It's got to be totally real. If it's ludicrous, you're not going to be afraid of it. I would say that my wish to perform, my wish to be an actor, which never came to fruition, is very integral to the creative process by which I develop characters for films."

An actor, hey? Well, a little background is in order here. Winston came to Hollywood in the '60s, after acting in college in Virginia, where he earned an art degree. Because he "didn't want to park cars or wait tables while waiting to be a star," he involved himself in a makeup apprenticeship program at Disney under veteran rubber eyes, ears, nose and throat man Bob Schiffer. "My model was Lon Chaney, an actor who went into character by virtue of makeup," Winston recalls. "I found that acting, what I came out here to do, became less of a passion. Creating characters was my passion and it didn't really make any difference how I was doing it. I was into a realm

where I was using my talents: drawing, painting, sculpting, being involved with actors in the character-creating process."

After winning an Emmy for *Gargoyles*, his first made-for-TV movie, then another for *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the jobs kept coming. Happily, according to Winston, they were jobs in the fantasy-film arena. "As a kid, I couldn't wait to see movies like *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* and *The Wizard of Oz*," he recalls of his Virginia childhood. "Watching men dressed up in big rubber suits, like in *Godzilla*, was fun but, they weren't convincing to me. They were too strapped by a lack of artistic and technical ability to really create live, believable monsters. The stop-motion movies, the ones where we could see real dinosaurs and real characters, like *King Kong* and *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, were my favorites. But, in my innocent mind, I always thought, 'Gosh, wouldn't it be nice not to know it was animation? For this to be really real?' Those are the things that pushed me in the direction that I eventually went in."

Outside of Industrial Light and Magic, Winston's venture with James Cameron would seem to have a lock on most of the top movie projects that call for big-time special effects. For *Tank Girl*, starring Lori Petty as the hellbent, randy warrior woman out of the British cult comic, he and his cohorts have designed, among other things, giant kangaroo suits. *Congo* will feature Winston's expression-filled simians. So, what of the upcoming bumper crop of sci-fi and fantasy projects might most thrill him? *Speed* director Jan De Bont's new *Godzilla*? Oliver Stone's new-wave *Planet of the Apes*? "I loved *Wolf*, but it's not a makeup person's dream of a werewolf. That's why we would like to do *An American Werewolf in Paris*. We can do what people missed—for that small community that wants to see the ultimate werewolf. I mean, I've always wanted to play a werewolf. Unfortunately, in this particular piece, I'm too old right now for any of the parts. Those things gnaw at me."

Winston may be most enthused about a project he hopes will become a feature movie that spawns his creation of "the most amazing amusement park that anybody has ever seen. I would like to create the ride that scares you more than the roller coaster, a ride that, by virtue of the characters you meet on it, robots that are so completely real, sends chills up your spine. You know the height requirement on roller coasters? On mine, you'd have to be a certain age!"

Stephen Rebello interviewed Johnny Depp for the October Movieline.

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